POLITICS

Navajos divided on taking a chance on legalized gambling

Tribe to vote on casino proposal

Associated Press

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — From the time Navajos emerged into this world gambling has been a part of their culture.

Their creation legends say there was a debate whether night or darkness would rule. Each side had its supporters and they played the "moccasin game" to see who should rule.

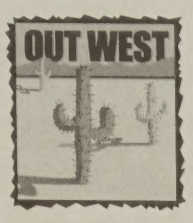
Neither side won the contest and that's why there is day and night.

The Navajos, America's biggest tribe with 220,000 enrolled members, vote on Nov. 8 on whether to legalize gambling. No polling information is available, but if they reject gambling they will be turning away from something many of them already practice.

The "moccasin game" — which involves putting stones in shoes like the white man's shell game — is now called "the shoe game" and is still played in all-night matches. Card games are popular, too.

The games can get pretty sophisticated, too, with side bets and efforts to dupe opponents, and comparatively large bets.

"I'm a gambling man myself. I can't see that it will hurt us to gamble. The tourists will come and spend their money. We need something because our tribal reserve fund is declining," said Harry Begay of Chinle.



Navajos are already losing their money at casinos operated by other tribes, said Grace Laughter of Kayenta, "They should be spending that money here."

Daniel Johnson, also of Kayenta, said, "I'm for it. I'm worried about the depletion of our natural resources. I would like to cut back on strip mining."

Air pollution from Four Corners power plants has made the tribe the target of much criticism. Its logging operation is stalled because of environmental problems.

It appeared the Navajo Nation was rushing to open casinos and cash in on an industry that is earning 91 tribes a total of $2.3 billion a year, when its council voted July 21 to legalize gambling. President Peterson Zah vetoed the law, saying it was so important the nation should vote on it in a referendum.

"All the other Indian tribes dove in full scale. Navajos are being very cautious. Yes, it's going to bring in a lot of revenue and tourists and create jobs. But what about the social impact. How are we going to handle that? Let's have an internal discussion. This way the consequences will be shared by all," Zah said in an interview.

Opponents complain that although Zah hasn't yet endorsed gambling, his economic development office staff is campaigning for it. A brochure prepared by the department says gambling will bring in $66 million a year — almost a quarter of the tribe's current annual budget — once five Navajo casinos are operating and their debt paid off.

The brochure says 2,710 full-time jobs and 490 part-time jobs will be created, reducing unemployment from 35 percent to 32.5 percent. Some additional crime and gambling addiction may result, the economic development office concedes.

Its brochure sums up: "A survey of Indian gaming tribes indicated that nearly all tribes agree that the benefits of gaming outweigh the social costs of gaming."

Some members of the Navajo Nation council have called for strict monitoring of gambling funds to make sure money isn't diverted, and that some is set aside to pay for programs to deal with compulsive gambling by Navajos.

"I don't like the proposal. It would open up a can of worms and disrupt our harmony. It will create an addiction to gambling. It's the worst that could happen to anyone. No one is prepared to offer treatment for it," said Elwood Saganey, a longtime local tribal official in Kayenta.

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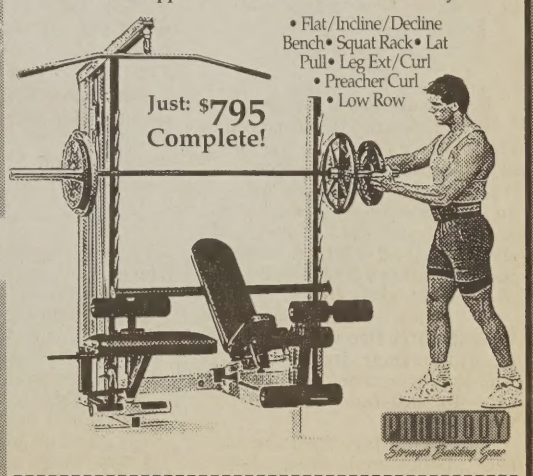
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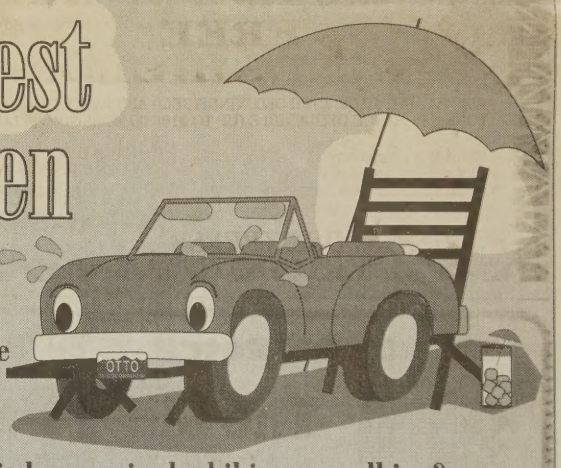

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POLITICS

Idaho is latest battleground over gay rights

By David Foster/Associated Press

HEYBURN, Idaho — From his mountainside home, Kelly Walton has a commanding view of the irrigated farmland and sagebrush plains of southern Idaho.

On a clear day, he can see the Sawtooth Mountains, 120 miles away.

Walton also spies other things on the horizon: Godlessness. Crumbling morals. A social and spiritual decay spreading across the nation, sapping its strength and stealing its soul.

He's talking about gays and lesbians. As chairman of the Idaho Citizens Alliance, Walton is the driving force behind a Nov. 8 ballot measure called Proposition 1. It has a lot of Idaho residents talking about homosexuality.

Issue quickly becoming the state's hottest topic

Proposition 1 would prohibit Idaho's state or local governments from giving gays and lesbians protection under anti-discrimination laws. It would bar public schools from suggesting homosexuality is acceptable, and would require libraries to keep books on gays and lesbians away from minors.

The ballot measure alone makes Walton noteworthy. Conservative Christians tried to put anti-gay rights measures on the ballot this year in 10 states and succeeded in only two: Idaho and Oregon. A similar measure, Amendment 2, passed in Colorado in 1992. It has encountered numerous setbacks in the courts and might be bound for the U.S. Supreme Court, if the justices agree to consider it.

More is at stake in Idaho than a ballot measure. Homosexuality is just the first issue Walton wants to tackle.

He's part of an increasingly vocal movement of conservative Christians translating religious beliefs into political action. From school-board elections to national Republican Party politics, the religious right is making its presence felt throughout the country.

'ssue stirs strong emotion mong many residents

Turn off Interstate 84, head south on Highway 30, and you'll know you're in Heyburn, population 2,714, when you see a big billboard in a cow pasture. It says "Prepare To Meet Thy God."

Drive another mile, past the grain bins of Western Seed, and you'll find a small cinderblock office. This is Walton Inc., a family run construction business, and inside is Kelly Walton, 38.

He is capable of stirring the strongest emotions. Opponents brand him a mean-hearted, homophobic zealot. The governor called him one of Idaho's "voices of hatred and intolerance." An anonymous caller left this message on his answering machine: "You're a dead man, you Nazi swine."

Walton shrugs off the criticism. "It takes a lot of guts to share the truth sometimes," he said.

In May, Walton and Idaho Citizens Alliance Executive Director Bill Proctor drove around Idaho for two weeks, speaking in churches and restaurants, asking shopkeepers to put initiative petitions on their counters.

Walton says he found widespread agreement for his message that homosexuality is unhealthy and immoral. The proof, he says, is in the numbers.

By July, 1,200 volunteers statewide had collected 38,510 valid signatures, well more than the 32,000 needed to put the measure on the ballot.

Gays have two choices — be in closet or out of town

It is 7 a.m. in Boise, and Brian Bergquist is arriving at the No On 1 Coalition headquarters for an interview. First, however, he must figure out how to turn off the alarm system.

As coalition chairman, he also has gotten threatening phone calls, including one from a man who said he intended to blow Bergquist's head off.

With the alarm off, Bergquist leads the way into a low-rent suite of rooms. It's hard to say which is uglier, the dingy brown carpet or dingy brown paneling. Bergquist looks around proudly. Donated, he says.

Gay activism bloomed late in Idaho. Boise's first gay-pride march was in 1990, and across much of rural Idaho, a gay or lesbian still has two basic choices: in the closet or out of town.

Bergquist, 36, was one of the first Idaho activists willing to go public. But just as Walton lacks the brimstone of a cable-TV preacher, neither is Bergquist, 36, an in-your-face activist.

"Just saying you're a gay or lesbian is a pretty radical thing here," Bergquist said.

Christians demanding their voices be heard

Nationwide, conservative Christian soldiers are marching into politics.

The Christian Coalition, founded by evangelist Pat Robertson, claims more than 1 million members. Its influence in the Republican Party was evident in September at the group's annual conference, which featured four 1996 presidential prospects: former Vice President Dan Quayle, former Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, Sen. Phil Gramm of Texas, and former Tennessee Gov. Lamar Alexander.

Religious right activists reportedly control or dominate nearly 20 state Republican parties. Christian groups are sponsoring hundreds of candidates for school boards, city councils and state legislatures.

Colorado voters approved a 1992 initiative prohibiting local governments from passing laws protecting gays and lesbians, but the law never took effect and was declared unconstitutional this month by the state Supreme Court.

The Colorado measure was a model for initiative campaigns this year in 10 states: Arizona, Florida, Idaho, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon and Washington. But the campaigns gathered enough signatures only in Idaho and Oregon.

In Idaho, it's almost irrelevant whether Proposition 1 wins or loses. Each side vows to continue the fight, building coalitions and exercising newfound political strength.

Proposition 1 has led many gays and lesbians to get involved politically for the first time, Bergquist said.

"People are realizing there's a price they pay for invisibility," he said.

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